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## A three-dimensional assessment of the New Middle Class in Iran: Economic, Social, and Political

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### Detailed Abstract

### Introduction

The article aims to measure the new middle class in Iran in three social, economic, and political dimensions to reach a reliable definition of the new middle class in Iran. The middle class was measured in the social dimension with the indicators of education, academic orientation and acquisition of political and social awareness, in the political dimension with the indicators of tendency to the rule of law, support for freedom of expression and belief, tendency to political participation, justice, equal job opportunities and citizenship rights, and in the economic dimension with agreement to borrow from abroad.

### Literature Reviews

Huge developments and transformations, including the First and Second World Wars, the communist revolution in Russia, the rise of fascism and Nazism in Germany and Italy, and the economic crisis and recession in the late 1920s in Western capitalist societies, accompanied the twentieth century. These developments had a fundamental impact on the fate of humanity. Still, after World War II, we are witnessing the emergence of stable democracies in Western societies centered on the middle class. E. P. Thompson, in his classic work, *The Rise of the English Working Class*, claims that the increase in job opportunities is not only directly related to the position of the working class in British society, but that this process also paved the way for the growth of the middle class in Britain. The first works on the emergence of the middle class in developing societies, including Iran, appeared gradually over the twentieth century, a century after Western societies. This process has accelerated significantly in the past few decades and has been the subject of various academic studies. Studies by the Brookings Institution on the "Position of the Middle Class in Developing Countries" show that this social class is not only of social, economic, and political importance in developed countries, but is also increasingly important in developing countries. Research conducted in Latin America and Africa has also reached similar results.

The reason for the growth of the middle class in developing countries is the expansion of the service sector, so that in the past few decades, with the increase in small and medium-sized private companies, banks, insurance companies, transport and railway companies, commercial companies and government service sectors, the ground has been provided for a significant growth in the number of entrepreneurs, government employees, teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, managers and legal professionals, and in general employees working in the service sector. This social group is the main body of the new middle class in such societies.

The middle class in Iran also has conditions similar to those of other developing societies. The emergence of a new, specialized middle class is considered a significant requirement of modernization, and the expansion of modern education in the Western style has led to the training of many educated people, economists, teachers, writers, and artists in Iran. The people of Iran were divided into four major classes on the eve of the twentieth century: "First, the royal class, including the central and local elites, second, the old commercial middle class, third, the wage earners, and fourth, the peasants, tribes, and peasants" (Abrahamian, 1998: 43); therefore, until the early twentieth century, the middle class in Iran consisted mainly of merchants and guilds located in cities and had a completely traditional structure. Given this fact, most experts separate the formation process of the new middle class in Iran up to the era of Reza Shah from the previous era and divide it into two distinct periods: first, the era of the traditional middle class,

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and second, the new one. The old or conventional middle class consisted of merchants, market guilds, clergy members, and old government employees. Abrahamian endorses this same division. He writes: The old traditional middle class consisted of merchants and artisans." This group provided "the financial needs of mosques, markets, schools, madrasas," and as a result had close relations with "preachers, clerics, students, mullahs, and even mujtahids". At the beginning of its emergence, the traditional middle class was not a "national and widespread political force," but rather a "socio-economic phenomenon". It is interesting to note that the middle class is more similar to the upper class in terms of cultural values, but similar to the working class in terms of income; However, in the second half of the 19th century, this class was faced with a dual challenge: "On the one hand, the growth of foreign trade accelerated the emergence of a small but wealthy dependent bourgeoisie, and on the other hand, the influx of goods, capital, and foreign merchants caused the weakness and decline of the national bourgeoisie". This challenge led to the politicization of this group, which paved the way for their cooperation with the clergy to confront the government. "Thus, the ground was prepared for the political revolution known as the Constitutional Revolution. The "traditional middle class," which had become more extensive and powerful during the 19th century, separated itself "economically, ideologically, and politically from the ruling class" and, along with other currents, stood against the central government in the blind alley of the "Constitutional Revolution". The new middle class follows the ideas of intellectuals in pursuit of achieving its aspirations and seeks political freedoms and development. Therefore, regardless of the Islamic Revolution in February 1979, the constitutional revolution was the last widespread socio-political emergence of the traditional Iranian middle class.

The widespread emergence of the new middle class accompanied the decline of the traditional middle class. In the early nineteenth century, two people (1811) and five people (1815) were sent to England. These people were the initial precursors of a group known as the "new middle class" in Iran. Despite its quantitative and qualitative growth during the era of Mohammad Reza Shah, the new middle class joined the protest movement in 1976. Two crises caused the middle class to join the protest movement in this era: "the economic crisis in the form of acute inflation; and the institutional crisis resulting from the application of external pressures on the Shah, the aim of which was to force the regime to adjust police controls and respect human rights, especially the rights of political opponents in Iran" (Abrahamian, 2008:613). The new middle class was thus placed alongside the traditional middle class, but with different political roles: "Although the traditional middle class provided the opposition with a broad and comprehensive organization, it was the new middle class that lit the torch of the revolution, supported it, and delivered the final blows" (Abrahamian, 1998: 657); the question was, "Why did the new middle class, which had previously been very suspicious of the clergy, agree to follow Ayatollah Khomeini? There were three reasons for this.

First, the Shah did not negotiate with the non-religious opponents, including the National Front and the Freedom Movement, until December 1978. Second, Ayatollah Khomeini had attracted the favorable opinion of the non-religious opponents with his statements and assured them that theocracy would never replace autocracy and authoritarian rule. The third reason for Ayatollah Khomeini's success was among the new middle class, especially among young intellectuals"; Ayatollah Khomeini even managed to attract the urban middle class, which constituted a significant part of the new middle class: "Ayatollah Khomeini's success in mobilizing urban wage earners had several reasons: first, his promise to create social justice. Second, despite being suspicious of high-ranking scholars, the regime did not prevent the lower-ranking clerics from working among the urban poor, organizing mourning ceremonies, funerals, and congregational prayers. Third, religion provided the sense of group and social solidarity needed by the population of the poor areas and slums. The fourth reason for Ayatollah Khomeini's success among the urban working class was the vacuum created by suppressing all secular opposition parties".

## **Conclusion**

The above historical description should help us understand what the "middle class" means and what indicators we can use to distinguish the middle class from other social classes. Social and political criteria generally define the middle class, but economic indicators are also crucial to arrive at a concise definition of the middle class. The middle class in the United States of America usually refers to people who earn about US\$110 per day. This statistic is based on data from the World Bank and the United Nations in 2011. This income threshold is consistent with the global definition of the middle class and refers to the livelihood status of families with a similar basket of consumer

goods. Suppose we were to consider the middle class in Iran with the same economic index and the government rate of 4,200 Tomans per dollar in 2017. In that case, those with a daily income of 110,000 Tomans or more in 2017 may be considered members of the middle class in Iran. Defining the middle class in Iran, like other classes, using a purely economic index is difficult due to the inflation rate and price fluctuations. Defining the middle class using global indicators also requires fundamental research in this field with economic, social, and political criteria. Our efforts to achieve a precise definition of the middle class in Iran also fail due to the lack of necessary information - information that responsible institutions such as the Central Bank and the Planning and Budget Organization should provide to researchers; Therefore, a comprehensive and objective definition of the middle class in Iran is not yet possible due to the above and many other reasons, we have to define this class in the existing objective and theoretical contexts. Also, the middle class in Iran is generally defined by citing the works of Ahmad Ashraf and Beno-Azizi. In such works, the middle class can be defined by citing the statistics of "freelance specialists, employees, military personnel, white-collar workers and technicians in the private sector and intellectuals". Jamshid Behnam also has a similar opinion: "The emergence of new middle classes, which were given the title of 'professional and administrative intellectuals,' is one of the crucial events of Iran's economic development in the modern era.

**Keywords:,,New middle class, social dimension, political dimension, economic dimension, Iran**